

Examiner Local Editorial: Taxpayers have become the servants in Montgomery County

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 GREG WHITESALL/EXAMINER

After a decade-long bender, economic reality has finally forced Montgomery County officials to confront the damage caused by their irresponsible spending. It's not a pretty sight.

A sobering report released by the county's Office of Legislative Oversight revealed that personnel costs increased 64 percent during the past 10 years. Compensation for Montgomery County employees now consumes 82 percent of all tax-supported spending in the county's \$4.2 billion budget. And for every tax dollar the county spends on bloated salaries, it spends another 52 cents on benefits for those same employees. This is even more than the 51 cents the federal government spends on benefits for its employees -- and twice as much as is typically spent in the private sector.

For 10 years, county employees' compensation outpaced inflation and population growth by 20 percent. Most of the higher pay and benefits went to the public school system, which gobbles up more than half of all county revenue and employs two-thirds of its total work force.

As The Examiner's Brian Hughes reported Wednesday, the combination of high salaries and overly generous benefits has now kicked the average compensation for all Montgomery County's "public servants" into the six-figure range. Within five years, OLO warns, fully one-third of the entire budget will be spent to cover their health and pension benefits and the county's debt service -- instead of on the supposedly gold-plated services they provide.

The OLO report also warned that "one-time solutions are insufficient to resolve the problem," but real structural change is not even on the table. After demonstrating their inability to force public employee unions to scale back their clearly unsustainable demands, feckless County Council members now want to abdicate 82 percent of their budgetary responsibility to unelected arbitrators who will be told they must "consider" the county's financial condition before resolving collective bargaining disputes.

This is madness. A council with any backbone -- or concern for the taxpayers who elected it to represent them -- would call the unions' bluff and immediately start privatizing large sections of the county's work force, not stopping until major concessions were made. After all, when taxpayers are forced to provide "public

servants" with more lavish benefits than can be found in either the private sector or the federal government, there's no doubt about who are really the servants in Montgomery County.